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Project Democracy muddled by some confused thinking

Confusion surrounds the new Project Democracy that the Reagan administration has proposed as a means of furthering democratic institutions around the world, in competition with the efforts of Soviet propaganda to win converts to its own distorted view of human freedom. Congressmen have bridled at proposals for carrying out the unimpeachable objectives of the project, mainly because muddy thinking has led to inept explanations in public hearings.

Behind the project, for which the administration seeks \$20 million this year and \$65 million next year, is the President's exhortation in London last June for a democratic initiative to compete with the Soviet system. In such a combat, the system of freedom should have nothing to fear. Mr. Reagan rightly thinks that its efforts should be open, not clandestine, and that they should be conducted as much as possible by private agencies rather than governmental.

Help for democratic forces in other countries can best come from agencies that are not tied to official policy, that span the transition from one administration to another. The West German practice of funding private foundations affiliated with each of its major political parties offers a useful example for this new undertaking. Private groups like those can deal with private groups or parties in other countries, where officials might find it impossible to tread because of diplomatic niceties or official sensibilities.

Moreover, American organizations that emulated the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Foundation) in West Germany could operate freely — we would hope — not only in Third World countries, but in those nations with less than tolerant governments

which, nevertheless, the United States befriends. It would hardly make sense to support democratic forces in so-called non-aligned countries, but to pull our punches in countries like South Korea or the Philippines, where dictatorial leaders seek to squelch dissent.

What is needed, mostly, is the chance for private organizations to work quietly, without bureaucrats breathing down their necks, to build contacts and friendships in other countries. It goes without saying that they must be divorced from government direction or any suspicion of it, and devoid of connection with the CIA or other clandestine operations. They cannot function adequately if they are, or are suspected of being fronts for intelligence agencies.

The West German foundations, including the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, affiliated with the Christian Democrats, have offices in many countries and programs that transcend government policies. The United States can profit from studying their operations. They may not be the whole answer to the question of ideological competition. Obviously, countries under the thumb of the Soviet Union will not welcome democratic agencies, governmental or private. Yet they should not be ignored. Radio stations like Radio Free Europe offer opportunities to cross political and military boundaries.

If substantive programs can be developed, the money will be well spent. If it is squandered on propaganda and public relations gimmicks, it will not only be wasted, but the effort may boomerang and cause more headaches than no program at all.

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